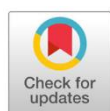


# Traditional ceremonies *Mahesa Lawung* as a traditional ritual of the Surakarta Palace in the Krendowahono Area, Central Java, Indonesia

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## Abstract

Traditional ceremonies are a form of culture passed down from generation to generation, reflecting a society's values, beliefs, and identity. This research aims to find out and understand the meaning of the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony, the types of plants and animals used, and the knowledge of local communities in the Krendowahono Karanganyar Site area, Central Java. The method used in this research is a qualitative observation method, including direct interviews with each respondent. Data was collected through interviews and direct observation at the research location. The research data collected includes regional names, common names, scientific names of plants and animals species as well as parts used for offerings at *Mahesa Lawung*, and the philosophies of the species that used in this traditional ceremony. There are 7 plants and 4 animal species used for the ceremony. The research results showed that the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony is still carried out today, especially at the Krendowahono Site. Of the three villages used as research locations, almost all people knew about the ceremony but only heard about it and saw it briefly. The *Mahesa Lawung* is a cultural history that needs to be preserved and maintained over time.

**Keywords:** Mahesa Lawung, traditional ceremonies, culture, Surakarta Palace

## Introduction

Culture manifests ideas and notions encouraging activities to produce works (physical culture), making humans social creatures with customs. Customs also include rules, principles, and provisions traditionally carefully guarded from generation to generation<sup>1</sup>. Tradition is a structure of understanding and belief in values and attitudes, crucial cultural elements to form ethical and aesthetic values, solidarity between people, and other social values in society to create a balance between material and



spiritual values<sup>2</sup>. Traditional ceremonies are activities or actions related to certain rules based on customs, beliefs, or religion<sup>3</sup>.

Local wisdom, such as traditional ceremonies, can become a tradition because it is reflected in people's living habits, which develop over time, even though it is a long process<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, culture has a complex relationship with human behavior patterns and nature. Culture is formed from interactions between humans and nature<sup>5</sup>. Indigenous communities in Indonesia depend on natural resources for food, medicine, and traditional ceremonies<sup>6</sup>. Natural resources used in traditional ceremonies include various elements such as plants, animals, water, and other natural objects; using natural resources is based on symbolism and spiritual meanings. Traditional ceremonies consist of everything obtained from nature that humans use as members of society<sup>7</sup>. Traditional ceremonies have procedures determined by the community, so each ritual is different, in terms of implementation and equipment<sup>8</sup>.

The city of Surakarta is divided into two palaces, namely, the Kasunanan Palace led by *Inggang Sinuhun Kanjeng Susuhunan (ISKS) Paku Buwono* and the Mangkunegaran Palace led by *Kanjeng Gusti Pangeran Adipati Arya (KGPAA) Mangkunegara*<sup>9</sup>. The Surakarta Kasunanan, also called Hadiningrat, was formed from the split of the Islamic Mataram kingdom and the movement of Kartasura to Surakarta during the Giyanti agreement of 13 February 1755, which divided the territory of the Yogyakarta Sultanate<sup>10</sup>. Apart from that, the Surakarta Kasunanan Palace is also one of the icons of Solo City and is a source of cultural heritage; it has various traditional ceremonies, such as the Caucasian buffalo carnival, which is held once a year on the first night of *Sura (1 Muharram)*<sup>11</sup>. At the traditional buffalo carnival ceremony, the Palace introduces heirloom objects, and the surrounding community receives their blessings<sup>12</sup>. Several traditional ceremonies held at the Kasunanan Palace in Surakarta can be a place to preserve current Javanese culture, especially culture in an environment that is now increasingly modern and technology is developing<sup>13</sup>.

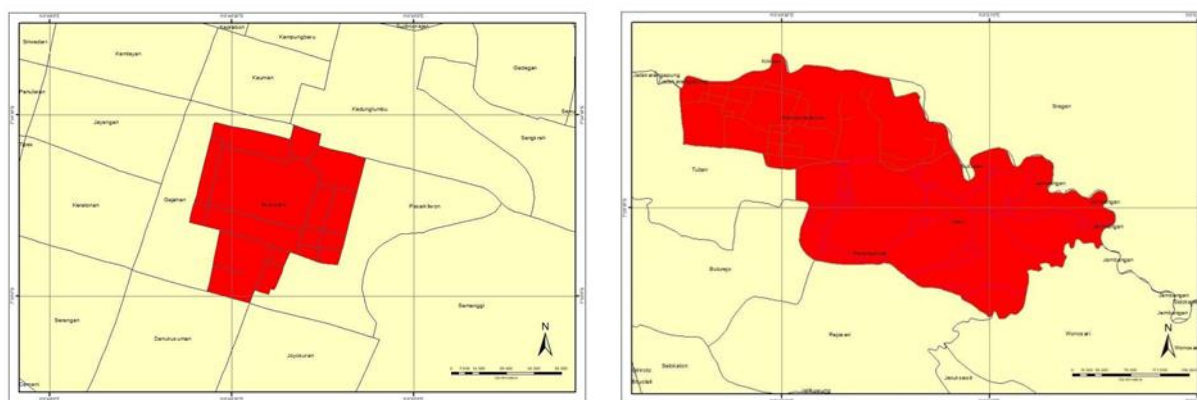
At the Surakarta Palace, the *Mahesa Lawung* ceremonial offerings continue to be preserved, plus the Kanjeng Kyai Slamet heritage carnival, which is still held today. This was done to maintain culture and ask for safety and blessings for the Surakarta Palace<sup>14</sup>. Mahesa Lawung is a dish in the form of a male buffalo head that has never been used for work<sup>15</sup>. This offering is surrendered to the ruler of the Krendhawahana Forest, *Bethari Kalayuwati*, who is entrusted with maintaining the security of the Surakarta Palace from the northern part<sup>16</sup>. *Mahesa Lawung* means offerings from two perspectives: first, as part of oral literature, and second, as a communication tool between humans and a link between the unseen world and the real world<sup>17</sup>. This traditional ceremony, although it is something that can change, is not something that is fixed or unchangeable<sup>18</sup>. This research aims to introduce and remind the public that a traditional ceremony called *Mahesa Lawung* is intended to cleanse evil spirits and ignorance. This ceremony strongly correlates with Javanese cultural acculturation from ancestors, which is preserved and carried out yearly.

## Materials and methods

### Research location and time

This research was carried out from November to December 2023 and conducted in 3 regional points, namely Baluwarti Village, Surakarta City with coordinates -7.578685749459891,

110.82680890625461, Krendowahono Village, Karanganyar Regency with coordinates - 7.463375525797576, 110.82390 023227396, and Dayu Village, Regency Karanganyar with coordinates - 7.476082650603118, 110.84265883024764 which is located in Central Java Province. The research location in Baluwarti Village was around the Kasunanan Palace in Surakarta<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, in Krendowahono Village and Dayu Village, it was carried out around the Krendowahono Site, Gondangrejo District, which is a historical site of the Surakarta Kasunanan Palace<sup>20</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Baluwarti District, Krendowahono Village, and Dayu Village

### Data collection

The type of research carried out in this study used a qualitative observation method, which included direct interviews with each respondent<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, a tally sheet of questions and a smartphone were used to collect questionnaire data during direct interviews with respondents. Research preparation includes several stages, namely creating a list of questions using Google Forms, which will be used during direct interviews to collect data. Then, an initial survey was conducted on the research location before conducting direct field observations to obtain information from the local community.

Moreover, data was collected through direct interviews and direct observation at the research location; the interviews used here are also called in-depth interviews<sup>22</sup>. This in-depth interview was conducted at three research locations, namely Baluwarti Village, Krendowahono Village, and Dayu Village, involving 60 respondents and 2 key informants. The 2 key informants are *Abdi Dalem* at the Kasunanan Palace named KRT. Rudianto Hadinegoro and *kuncen* (caretaker) at Punden Krendowahono named Darsono. Punden is a sacred space, an embodiment of the inner responsibility and gratitude of the community to the ancestors who built the village<sup>23</sup>. The interview aims to obtain direct data on community knowledge regarding the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony held in the Kasunanan Palace area and the Krendowahono Site. Respondent data was obtained using a purposive sampling technique, carefully selected based on certain characteristics<sup>24</sup>. This data collection technique is quite commonly used and easy to apply<sup>25</sup>. Field observations were carried out by exploring the research location based on information from each respondent.

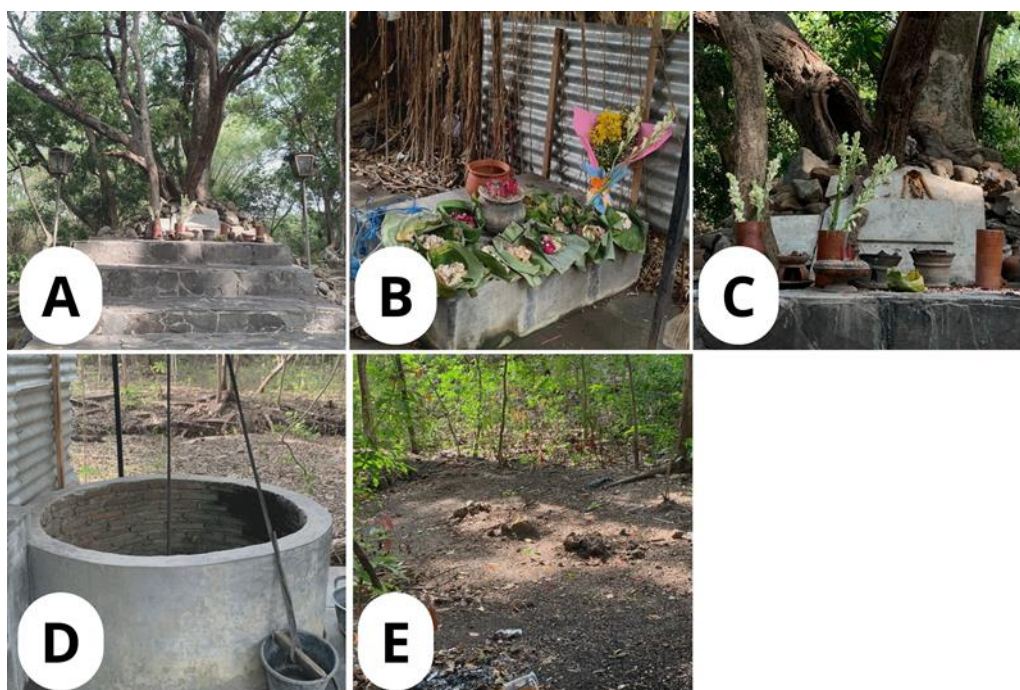
### Data analysis

Data analysis in this research aims to discover the philosophy of the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony and identify what animals and plants are used for offerings during the ceremony. The data

are displayed in the tables based on local names, common names, scientific names, and what parts are used in animals and plants for *Mahesa Lawung's* traditional ceremonial offerings<sup>26</sup>.

## Results

Mahesa Lawung held in several places and full of with various activities. Punden, Sima Well, buffalo burial ground, and offerings with some sacred plants and animals (**Figure 2, Table 1-2**). The objective of this ceremony was combined the purity of microcosmos (purity of selves) and macrocosmos (the prosperity of region and country) combined with local wisdom and tradition. On the other hand, the local wisdom only can be traced to the local community knowledge and awareness of the surrounding people. In order to determine those factors, there were interviews to unveil the villagers' understandings of Mahesa Lawung. The local community widely knows the Mahesa Lawung traditional ceremony in Baluwarti Village as well 82.61% of the population. However, around 8.70% of the people did not understand this traditional ceremony. In contrast, in Krendowahono Village showed only 8.70% of the people of villagers understood this ceremony in depth. Punden is a gathering location for people to watch traditional ceremony processions. Meanwhile, all the respondents (8.70% of total) from Dayu Village said that they only have heard about the traditional ceremony process but have never witnessed it directly.



**Figure 2.** The place where traditional ceremonies are held: A. *punden*, B. the offerings that are served (*sesajen*), C. the *Punden Betari Durga*, D. Shina Well, E. the place where the buffalo head is buried in the ground.

## Discussion

Indonesian society is a multi-ethnic group that grows on cultural heritage and traditions that each ethnic group carefully guards. In Java, there are mystical developments involving interactions between culture and religion. This practice reflects a belief in the existence of something outside humans

that has a positive influence. In Surakarta, we can find various mystical traditions, especially those aimed at asking for blessings. For example is the tradition at the Kasunanan Palace, which occurs in the Krendawahana Forest as part of a series of *Mahesa Lawung* ceremonies. The ceremony involves worship, prayer, planting a buffalo head, and presenting various offerings under the trees. From the beginning to the end, the ritual made mystical things part of the community's historical knowledge<sup>27</sup>. The *Mahesa Lawung* ceremony has become an annual tradition of the Surakarta Kasunanan Palace. This traditional ceremony is held every Monday and Thursday during *Jumadil Akhir* of the Javanese calendar. The procession is carried out by palace servants (*Abdi Dalem*)<sup>28</sup>. In addition, the *Mahesa Lawung* ceremony is also carried out in several areas, such as in the Yogyakarta area, specifically at PG. Madukismo, by presenting a buffalo head ceremony<sup>29</sup>.

**Table 1.** Animals used in *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony

Local name	Family	Common name	Scientific name	Parts used
Ayam Kampung	Phasianidae	Free-range chicken	<i>Gallus gallus f. domesticus</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	All
Belalang	Acrididae	Chinese grasshopper	<i>Acrida cinerea</i> (Thunberg, 1815)	All
Kerbau	Bovidae	Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Head and flesh
Ikan Lele	Clariidae	Catfish	<i>Clarias batrachus</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	All

This tradition involved several traditional processions that include various offerings, such as buffalo heads, flowers, and foods with cosmological connotations. This procession was divided into two parts, namely *Wilujengan Nagari* in *Bangsas Sewayana* of the Siti Hinggil Palace complex and implementing the *Mahesa Lawung* offering ritual in the Krendowahono Forest. The *Wilujengan Nagari* section, led by *Abdi Dalem* Suranata, involved saying prayers in Arabic and Javanese translation versions. The purpose of this prayer was not only for the safety of the Palace but also for the Republic of Indonesia (RI). The head of a young buffalo, used as an offering beforehand, is offered as a "sacrifice or oblation," and the meat is distributed as alms to fellow human surroundings. K.G.P.H. Poeger explained that the *Mahesa Lawung* procession begins with a prayer, one of which aims to treat nature as part of living creatures. This ritual ended with burying a buffalo head, which is considered a symbol of "foolishness"<sup>30</sup>. *Mahesa Lawung's* offerings can be analyzed from two perspectives: the overall aspect of the ritual ceremony carried out and the *ubarampe* offerings available in that tradition. The function of this offering ritual could be divided into two: as part of oral literature and as a means of offering. The mythical story of *Mahesa Lawung's* offerings acts as an educational instrument that provides information that there are supernatural powers that exceed human abilities. This myth reassures humans in the present context and provides an understanding of the world's existence. The function of *Mahesa Lawung* offerings in traditional ceremonies includes its role as a communication tool between humans and as a bridge that connects the unseen world and the real world<sup>17</sup>.

The picture above is part of the Krendowahono Site, which is divided into several places: *Punden Betari Durga* (place where people pray); offerings are used for ceremonies and are always placed next to the Sina Well; Sina Well (believed to bring blessings and good fortune); and buffalo head is buried when

the *Mahesa Lawung* ceremony is carried out (**Figure 2**). The *Mahesa Lawung* ceremony is characterized by slaughtering a buffalo because, in the Javanese philosophy, the buffalo is considered a symbol of stupidity. Therefore, burying a buffalo head reflects an effort to ward off ignorance. Apart from that, this ritual also functions as a prayer to God Almighty, asking for abundant safety for the Palace. Apart from buffalo, other animals are also offered in this traditional ceremony, such as free-range chickens, grasshoppers, and catfish. *Ayam kampung* in traditional Javanese ceremonies is usually served whole, which called *Ayam ingkung*. *Ayam ingkung* comes from the word *manengkung* which means praying to God with sincerity<sup>31</sup>. Apart from that, according to Windyasari<sup>32</sup>, if chickens are given food, they don't eat it immediately but choose first which food is good and which is not. In this way, humans are expected to be able to sort out which good things should be done and which bad things should be abandoned. Grasshoppers are agile animals, which when they walk, they jump around. Therefore, in Javanese traditional ceremonies, the offering of grasshoppers implies that humans must have an agile nature in thinking and acting<sup>33</sup>. The offering of catfish at the Mahesa Lawung traditional ceremony is called *Lele Sajodho Kendhil*, which means that pair of catfish was placed in the *kendhil* (container). The meaning of this offering is to show that all creatures created by God are in pairs (**Table 1**)<sup>34</sup>.

**Table 2.** Plants used in *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony

Local name	Family	Common name	Scientific name	Parts used
Cempaka putih	Magnoliaceae	White champaca	<i>Magnolia alba</i> (Figlar, 2000)	Flower
Kelapa	Arecaceae	Coconut	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> (L, 1753)	Fruit and leaves
Kenanga	Annonaceae	Macassar oil tree	<i>Cananga odorata</i> (Hook.f. and Thomson)	Flower
Mawar putih	Rosaceae	White rose	<i>Rosa alba</i> (L, 1753)	Flower
Mawar Tiongkok	Rosaceae	Bengal rose	<i>Rosa chinensis</i> (Jacq. 1768)	Flower
Melati	Oleaceae	Arabian jasmine	<i>Jasminum sambac</i> (L.Aiton)	Flower
Pisang raja	Musaceae	French plantain	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i> (L, 1753)	Fruit

According to Wulandari and Baehaqie<sup>35</sup>, the concept of *kembang setaman warna* has a deep meaning, namely *winawar ing tembung Manis* which means that every word expressed must be in harmony with the feelings of the heart to achieve harmony and honesty. In the context of offerings, this concept refers to the desire for the spirit being worshiped to feel sincerity. In the *Mahesa Lawung* Traditional ceremony, there are several types of flowers used as offerings, such as White champaca (*M. alba*), Arabian jasmine (*J. sambac*), Kenanga (*C. odorata*), Bengal rose (*R. chinensis*), and white rose (*R. alba*). The White champaca (*M. alba*), commonly known as the kantil, has a spiritual meaning for achieving physical and mental success (**Table 2**). This flower also symbolizes deep and unbroken affection for all living creatures<sup>36</sup>, likewise with the meaning of the Arabian jasmine (*J. sambac*), which contains a message to always involving the heart in every action and speech. *Melati* also teaches that harmony between the inner and outer is maintained without any pretence in living life<sup>37</sup>. In Javanese tradition, the Arabian jasmine (*J. sambac*) has the meaning *memangen ing angga* which emphasizes the importance of remembering ancestral heritage in the form of local wisdom values in art, tradition, culture, philosophy, and spiritual science. *Kenanga* means *kenang ing angga* which teaches each generation always to appreciate and remember their heritage<sup>38</sup>. The Bengal rose (*R. chinensis*), meaning *dumadine jalma manungsa* symbolizes human birth into the mortal world process. The red rose also symbolizes the

mother as the birthplace where the human body and soul are carved. On the other hand, the white rose (*R. alba*) depicts the Father's role as the creator of the human spirit. From a macrocosmic perspective, the combination of Father Heaven and Mother Earth, or Father and Mother of the Indonesian nation (*Nusantara Ibu Pertiwi*), is expected to create a superior and balanced generation, carrying the principle of *gemah ripah loh jinawi, tata titi tentrem kerta raharja*<sup>36</sup>.

Apart from using several important types of flowers in the *Mahesa Lawung* Ceremony, the event also uses various agricultural products, such as French plantain (*M. paradisiaca*) and coconuts (*C. nucifera*). French plantain (*M. paradisiaca*), one of the banana varieties often used in traditional ceremonies, has the shape of two plantain combs that reflect harmony and duality, symbolizing the right and left hands joining together when praying. Two banana combs have deep meaning as a symbol of two elements: men and women, earth and sky, and day and night. Plantain itself has connotations of authority, like a king, and the existence of plantain in *ubarampe* is expected to bring authority to the community and provide protection and security<sup>39</sup>. From the perspective of Arifah and Sukarman<sup>40</sup>, coconut (*C. nucifera*) is prepared as an offering or oblation to symbolize the relationship between humans and God. The water from green coconuts symbolizes purity and cleanliness, so for those who hope in God, their body and heart must be clean for their holiness, hence, God will give their blessing. The green color of coconuts symbolizes those who worship God. Therefore, the desired hope must emanate from a pure, clean heart and soul so that God accepts and makes it materializes with peace and tranquility. Apart from the fruit, coconut leaves are also used. According to Ariani<sup>41</sup><sup>39</sup>, coconut leaves have a philosophical meaning as a symbol of someone's hope to illuminate their life, as is the meaning contained in the coconut leaf itself. The yellow color of coconut leaves brings a philosophy of hope from a pure heart and soul. Yellow coconut leaves are a philosophical sign of high hope, born from a pure heart to obtain God's enlightenment with the goal that all actions and activities can go well and happiness ends.

The local community widely knows the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony in Baluwarti Village. 82.61% of the people have heard about this traditional ceremony. This shows that the people of Baluwarti Village are highly aware of their culture. However, around 8.70% of them still did not understand this traditional ceremony. This may be because these people have never witnessed this traditional ceremony procession at sites. In Krendowahono Village, perceptions of the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony were different. 8.70% of the people understood this ceremony in depth. This may be because these people are highly interested in their culture and often do this traditional ceremonial procession, even as spectators. Other as 73.91% understood or has witnessed these traditional ceremony processions during the study period. This may be due to the presence of a special place or the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony *punden* in the village. *Punden* is a gathering location for people to watch traditional ceremony processions. Meanwhile, the other 8.70% do not understand this traditional ceremony. This may be because the community has never witnessed this traditional ceremony procession on their sites. Meanwhile, all the respondents from Dayu Village said that they only have heard about the traditional ceremony process but have never witnessed it directly. This is because the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony is closed, and only courtiers or interested parties are allowed to take part in this traditional ceremony. Generally, public awareness of the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony is still quite high. However, some people still do not understand this traditional ceremony in

depth. The government and local community need to pay more attention to this phenomenon so that the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony remains sustainable and enjoyable for the wider community.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, research shows that the *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony is still carried out today, especially at the Krendowahono Site. Almost all residents were familiar with this ceremony from three research location villages, even though they only heard stories and saw glimpses of it. The Mahesa Lawung ceremony is closely related to Javanese cultural acculturation, passed down from generation to generation yearly on every Monday and Thursday during *Jumadil Akhir*. This ceremony used four animals: (*G. gallus f. domesticus*), *A. cinerea*, *B. bubalis*, and *C. batrachus*. Apart from animals, this ceremony also uses various flowers as offerings, such as *M. alba*, *J. sambac*, *R. chinensis*, and *R. alba*. Agricultural products, such as *M. paradisiaca* and *C. nucifera*, also complement the offerings. The *Mahesa Lawung* traditional ceremony is a traditional heritage that has been successfully preserved. This traditional ceremony is a form of gratitude and is believed to be able to cleanse evil spirits and release ignorance and important in maintaining the values of community cultural life. This ceremony contains symbols that are guardians of life values,. Therefore, Mahesa Lawung's traditional ceremony must be preserved to preserve Javanese culture's richness.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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